

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY  
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

STATEMENT OF

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On

FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Program In Haiti: How to Apply  
Lessons Learned at Home

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION  
AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,  
PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**February 3, 2010**

Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am William L. Carwile, III, Associate Administrator for Response and Recovery, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I am a retired U.S. Army Colonel, and I have served as a Federal Coordinating Officer and in other senior management positions on large federal disaster response operations between 1996 and 2005. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on such an important topic: our nation's Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) teams.

The National US&R Response System is an outstanding example of an effective federal, state and local partnership that provides for the protection of our citizens in times of disaster. One of Administrator Fugate's highest priorities this coming year is to continue focusing on improving catastrophic event preparedness through closer collaboration with our partners. The bottom line is that we need to be prepared to respond to catastrophic events. The National US&R Response System and Task Forces are critical to achieving this capability. Under the lead of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), last month, the life-saving capabilities of American US&R teams were on display during the response to the catastrophic earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. With their partners from around the world, these brave Americans worked around the clock to pull survivors from collapsed buildings and homes. We believe the lessons learned in Haiti will help us to be better prepared for domestic response.

### **Mission and Structure**

The National US&R Response System is a coordinated, national, all-hazards capability designed to assist state and local governments' response to structural collapse incidents. The system may be activated when the President declares a major disaster or emergency under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), 42 U.S.C. 5121 *et seq.*, or through interagency agreements with other federal agencies, such as USAID for international deployments.

The system consists of 28 Task Forces, strategically located throughout the continental United States. Each Task Force is comprised of highly trained individuals who possess the necessary expertise to locate, extricate and medically treat victims in heavy rescue and structural collapse situations. The system is administered by FEMA through cooperative agreements with state and local agencies throughout the country that sponsor the Task Forces.

Each Task Force is comprised of 70 multi-faceted, cross-trained personnel who serve in seven major functional areas including search, rescue, medical, hazardous materials, logistics, planning and command. Our personnel are also supported by canines trained to conduct physical search operations in damaged or collapsed reinforced concrete buildings. A Task Force can be divided into two 35-member teams to provide 24-hour search and rescue operations. Self-sufficient for the initial 72 hours, Task Forces are equipped with convoy vehicles to support over-the-road deployments and can be configured into Light Task Forces to support weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes and similar incidents.

FEMA can activate and deploy a Task Force to a disaster area to provide assistance in structural collapse rescue, or pre-position them in anticipation of a major disaster threatening a community.

Each Task Force must have the capability to stage all of its personnel and equipment at the embarkation point within six hours of activation, so that it can be quickly dispatched and deployed to its destination. To maximize Task Force efficiency and effectiveness during disaster responses, the National US&R Response System FEMA Program Office utilizes a pre-defined geographical assignment list and a well-defined rotational schedule to initially deploy the Task Forces closest to the incident. Deployments generally range from 10 to 14 days. The number of Task Forces that are deployed is based on the magnitude and needs at the site of the disaster or event. During extended response operations, Task Forces are rotated, ensuring that Task Force members are refreshed, available at all times, and ready to respond to multiple events.

Specific US&R Task Force capabilities include the following:

- Conducting physical search and rescue operations in damaged/collapsed structures;
- Providing reconnaissance to assess damage and needs, and to report results to appropriate officials;
- Rendering emergency medical care for trapped victims, US&R personnel and search canines;
- Surveying and evaluating hazardous materials threats;
- Assessing and shutting off utilities to homes and other buildings;
- Operating in known or suspected weapons-of-mass-destruction environments;
- Providing structural and hazard evaluations of buildings; and
- Stabilizing damaged structures, including shoring and cribbing.

### **National US&R Response System Deployment Record**

For more than 18 years, FEMA's National US&R Response System has been a valuable national disaster response asset. It has responded to more than 50 major disaster and emergency missions. The importance of US&R capabilities in saving lives has been demonstrated in every event.

FEMA US&R teams have responded swiftly and ably to the major U.S. disasters of the past two decades, including the 1995 Oklahoma City Murrah Building bombing, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, and Hurricanes Ike and Gustav in 2008.

During the September 11 terrorist attacks, in the combined response to the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, although a total of 25 Task Forces were utilized in responding to the event,

no more than 16 Task Forces were activated at any given time, even at the height of the disaster response effort, leaving 11 available to respond to other events.<sup>1</sup>

During Hurricane Katrina, in coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard and other federal and state agencies, US&R was instrumental in rescuing more than 6,500 people from flooded areas in New Orleans and providing them with meals, water and necessary medical care. This tremendous response effort was led by a group of dedicated personnel who built an infrastructure and organization to support and manage a massive rescue and relief effort that far surpassed any disaster response challenge ever faced by the US&R Response System. During the combined responses to Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi, all 28 Task Forces were utilized at some point during the response. However, even at the height of the response, no more than 18 Task Forces were activated, leaving 10 available to backfill or respond to other events.

During the responses to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008, FEMA deployed US&R Task Forces to Texas and Louisiana and formed a successful unified command structure that ensured strong coordination with state and local responders.

USAID had previously contracted directly with two of the Task Forces in FEMA's National US&R Response System (Virginia TF-1—Fairfax County and California TF-2—Los Angeles County) search and rescue teams. In addition, to support the earthquake response in Haiti, USAID contracted with FEMA to bring in four additional US&R teams beyond VA TF-1 and CA TF-2. There were roughly 60 teams from around the world supporting the earthquake response in Haiti. Collectively the US US&R teams rescued 47 people, 42 of which were by teams (or included team members) that were currently or previously contracted directly by USAID). These teams participated as part of a total of 67 search and rescue teams from around the world after the earthquake in Haiti

In all of these disasters, US&R was instrumental in supporting critical life-saving and life-sustaining efforts. These examples demonstrate the breadth and depth, as well as the flexibility of, the critical rescue capabilities that exist in the national US&R Response System. Of particular note is the fact that even during the most significant national disasters, the system's capabilities have never been overwhelmed. At least 10 Task Forces have always been available for response, providing a surge capacity for multiple events or prolonged operations.

FEMA has determined that the 28 existing Task Forces, with ongoing and sustained enhancements, provide the capacity and capability to meet the urban search and rescue needs of our country for emergencies and major disasters declared under the Stafford Act. Currently, we do not see a need to increase the number of Task Forces and, in fact, believe that to do so would dilute the available funding for these Task Forces and impede ongoing enhancement efforts. Other programs exist that allow states to procure and develop search and rescue capabilities. Indeed, many states have expressed an interest in enhancing their statewide search and rescue capabilities, and we encourage them to apply for funding through their State Emergency Management Offices or FEMA's grant programs, including the Urban Area Security Initiative. The National US&R Program Office is also facilitating opportunities for the 28 National US&R

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there were 11 total available Task Forces, not 12, because NY-Task Force 1, which suffered its own losses in the terrorist attack, was being used as a state resource.

Task Forces to share their expertise by interacting, training and exercising with state, regional or local-level search and rescue teams. In keeping with this theme, the National US&R Program Office routinely shares training materials and operational manuals with state partners for their use and training, thus further expanding and leveraging overall search and rescue capabilities.

### **Expansion of National Response Framework ESF-9 Scope**

As the primary agency for the National Response Framework's Emergency Support Function (ESF)-9, FEMA is responsible for developing national policy, providing planning guidance and coordinating assistance, standardizing procedures and evaluating operational readiness, funding equipment and training, and reimbursing Task Forces for costs incurred as a result of a deployment. While the number of National US&R Task Forces has not increased, the scope of ESF-9 search and rescue operations has been expanded over the last few years to address broader search and rescue operational needs on land and in flood environments, and to include large area and aeronautical searches.

The FEMA US&R Branch, in cooperation with our ESF-9 Search and Rescue (SAR) partners (e.g., U.S. Coast Guard, Department of the Interior/National Park Service, and Department of Defense) revised and improved the National Response Framework ESF-9 Annex, and the Catastrophic Incident Search and Rescue Addendum to the National Search & Rescue Plan. The changes to these documents clarified roles and responsibilities, resulting in improved interagency integration during 2009 disaster response SAR operations, including the response to the North Dakota flooding disaster. Many local emergency response organizations are now using these documents to refine and further develop existing SAR capabilities by adopting Federal ESF-9 doctrine, for instance using the U. S. National Grid System to define ground search areas and using a standard format for stating latitude and longitude.

### **US&R Focus and Funding**

The focus of current national US&R Response System implementation is on standardizing, preparing, and maintaining the capabilities of the existing 28 National US&R Task Forces. On-Site Readiness Evaluations of the Task Forces have identified improvement areas for all Task Forces, including training, equipment, and mobilization drills. The evaluations have been beneficial in helping to identify and focus on priorities necessary to ensure maintenance of full capability of all Task Forces.

Since Fiscal Year 2006, Congress has appropriated funds specifically to support National US&R Response System response capabilities, as follows: Fiscal Year 2006 (\$20 million), Fiscal Year 2007 (\$25 million), Fiscal Year 2008 (\$32.5 million), Fiscal Year 2009 (\$32.5 million), and Fiscal Year 2010 (\$32.5 million). Congressional appropriations provide approximately \$1 million to each of the 28 Task Forces. These funds are to be used for Task Force management; training and exercises; cache storage and maintenance; hazardous material equipment maintenance; medical screening for Task Force members; and program staffing support. A Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) response capability was developed for the US&R Task Forces after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

However, the 28 Task Forces continue to maintain a basic capability to detect and monitor the presence of hazardous materials during a mission (i.e., site characterization, basic containment, and extrication and decontamination of trapped survivors and rescue personnel).

In light of today's evolving threat environment, we must ensure that the capabilities of the National US&R System are maximized to respond to all types of catastrophic events. As such, I plan to undertake a comprehensive review of the system in coordination with the Sponsoring Agencies. As part of this review, we will examine the program structure and identify Departmental programs and resources that we can more fully leverage to support the system.

### **Lessons Learned in Haiti**

It is premature to draw final conclusions and lessons learned from the Haiti response. Just as lessons learned in past responses have contributed to the continued development and improvement of the US&R System, ultimately we believe the lessons learned during the deployment to Haiti will contribute to our future domestic response operations.

Lessons learned will be identified as we continue to review our efforts and conduct after action reviews. During this process, our thoughts and prayers will continue to be with the people of Haiti.

### **Conclusion**

While it is important to highlight the past and ongoing successes and accomplishments of the National US&R Response System, it is also critical that we continue to build and maintain the capabilities of these critical response assets. The task forces represent a partnership involving federal and local government, as well as private sector experts. As we continue to learn lessons from search and rescue operations, the teams will continue to grow in capability and expertise. I thank you for your continued support and oversight of these important teams.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this exceptional federal asset. I look forward to answering any questions.